

Future of the North End:

North End Revitalization Task Force

Meeting 3 Report

August 8, 2018

Overview

The North End Revitalization Task Force held its third meeting on Aug. 8 at Sandy Springs City Hall, following an orientation meeting on July 11 and a public visioning session on July 25. This meeting was to discuss the current situation in the North End, review the citizens' ideas about the North End's future, and create a SWOT analysis (which stands for "strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats") for the North End. The meeting closed with a discussion of the meetings ahead. Eleven of the 14 members were present.

The major work of this session was the SWOT analysis. Here are some of the highlights:

Major strengths:

- Larger parcels of land are available in the North End than elsewhere in the city.
- There is strong community support for revitalization.
- There are specific opportunities with some underperforming retail developments.
- There is good North-South access along Roswell Road and Georgia 400.

Major weaknesses:

- **Typography:** the land in the North End tends to be hilly and has stream buffers that may hinder development.
- Access to the Chattahoochee River is limited, and it may be difficult to create additional access.
- Public perception of the North End remains a problem.
- Existing apartment complexes, while dated, are highly profitable. This may limit interest in revitalization.

Major opportunities:

- There may be a number of funding sources, public, private and philanthropic, that could be used in the revitalization effort.
- An economic downturn might actually work in favor of revitalization, as land prices decline.
- There are changing attitudes about lifestyle that may be a benefit for revitalization, including openness to mixed-use, mixed-income communities and alternative transportation (walkable neighborhoods, bike paths, etc.)
- There are plans for transit expansion up the Georgia 400 corridor, which could make the North End a more desirable location.

Major threats:

- Federal funding for projects such as this one are limited and may grow even more so.
- Transit expansion plans may not be realized.
- Construction costs could rise.
- Support for revitalization may waiver over time.

The Task Force also heard a presentation about the current situation in the North End. Here are some of the highlights:

- Residents of the North End today tend to be slightly younger, more diverse and less affluent than most residents of Sandy Springs.
- Residents are more likely to be renters than homeowners
 - 69 percent in the North End rent their homes rather than own them
 - In the city as a whole, 53 percent are renters.
- There have been dramatic changes in the retail vacancy rate in the North End in recent years.
 - When a big-box retailer closes, it has a big impact on vacancy rates.
 - Stores in the North End tend to be larger than elsewhere in the city.
- There are topographic challenges in the North End, including protected land near the Chattahoochee River and stream buffers elsewhere.
- Crime rates in the North End are similar to rates elsewhere in the city
 - Public perception, however, tends to be that crime is higher there.

Meeting process

Steve Soteres, who is chair of the Task Force, welcomed members to this session of the North End Revitalization Task Force. He then turned the meeting over to the facilitator, Otis White.

Otis suggested that the Task Force work in small groups, as it had in its first meeting. The reason, he said, is that it multiplies the conversation among members and encourages quieter members to speak.

In this meeting, members of Group 1 were: Carolyn Axt, David Couchman, Charles Crosby, Collin Hubbard and Gabe Sterling. The members of Group 2 were: Melanie Couchman, Patrick Jones, Richard Munger, Rhonda Smith and Meaghan Shannon-Vikovic.

In this meeting, members discussed what the citizens had said in the July 25 public visioning meeting, heard a presentation from Andrea Worthy, economic development director for the City of Sandy Springs, did the SWOT analysis mentioned above, and discussed the next steps for the planning process.

What the citizens said

Before this meeting, Task Force members received the 28-page report of the public visioning session on July 25. In the visioning session, approximately 270 citizens working in 15 small groups offered 347 ideas and images about what the North End could be and how the Task Force could address part of its mission, which is to add new residents to the North End while making a place for those already living there. All the ideas, plus additional ones submitted after the meeting on the city's website, were included in the report.

The report also included a summary analysis of the ideas. (Note: Like most vision statements, this one is written as if the ideal community were fully realized.) The ideas fell into six categories:

Environment and Outdoors: The North End takes advantage of its proximity to the Chattahoochee River and protected forests with greater access to these assets. And it creates additional environmental and recreational assets, including green spaces, walking and biking trails, and outdoor recreation. There is a major new park called North End Park that is suitable for concerts and large gatherings.

Transportation and Mobility: Roswell Road is “tamed” so that it is safer, more attractive, and easier to cross on foot, bike or by car. The neighborhoods of the North End are walkable. There is a major expansion of mobility options in the North End, including walking and biking trails, bike lanes on streets, pedestrian traffic signals, and perhaps a new transit option, such as a trolley or monorail.

Urbanism and Quality of Life: The North End is a “complete community” (or series of communities) with retail, restaurants, entertainment, groceries, and offices within walking distance of residences; perhaps with a “small-town feel” (like Roswell and Decatur). There are different types of residences but throughout the North End, there is attention to landscaping, so people enjoy the walk from one area to another. The offices/work spaces that locate in the North End are attracted for its ambiance and attraction to workers, but they also want access to the North End's high-speed internet offerings.

Arts, Culture and Sports: In the new North End Park, there are regular outdoor concerts and events which attract people from across Sandy Springs and from surrounding cities. There is also a North End Arts Center with classes and galleries. Not far away is a community sports complex with soccer fields, basketball courts and more.

Education: Through a partnership with the City of Sandy Springs government and a coalition of nonprofit organizations, Fulton County Schools are using the North End to pioneer new STEM programs and other magnet-school concepts. One of these programs is a “joint enrollment” option that allows high school students to take college courses for credit. One of the community initiatives in the North End is to make the schools more attractive and inviting, working with families to better understand the value of a public education.

Affordability and Diversity: The North End has found a way to preserve much of the diversity it had in 2018, through affordable housing efforts which created mixed-income communities, even as the North End's population grew significantly. The diversity that resulted was not only by race and ethnicity, but by age, income, education and ability/disability. One key to maintaining the diversity was an active nonprofit presence, which included programs like affordable day care.

For this session, the facilitator divided the six summaries into two groups. To Group 1, Otis gave Environment and Outdoors, Transportation and Mobility, and Urbanism and Quality of life. To Group 2, he gave the summaries dealing with Arts, Culture and Sports, Education, and Affordability and Diversity. He asked each group to read the summaries for their categories, discuss the ideas and say which ideas stood out to them.

Here is what the groups said:

Group 1:

- Environment and Outdoors:
 - Walking and biking trails that connect to the river and entire zone within the North End.
 - Green space and community center (big new park) with recreational opportunities.
- Urbanism and Quality of Life:
 - Small-town feel that is developed in nodes that have its own identity and green space
- Transportation and Mobility:
 - Tame Roswell Road
 - Alternative modes of transportation

Group 2:

- Education:
 - Technical skills/vocational training
 - Partnerships between nonprofits and Fulton schools, joint enrollment for college credits
 - **Positive image:** attractive and inviting, both building/campus and education quality
- Affordability and Diversity:
 - Preserved diversity/affordability, mixed-income, access to ownership
- Arts, Culture and Sports:
 - Sports destination complex – but is there a true need? Or is it a connectivity issue to existing facilities?
 - Parks, events, natatorium, soccer
 - *Community gardens (not listed but was discussed at the public meeting)*

Current situation

Andrea Worthy offered the Task Force a look at the current situation in the North End—a snapshot of what the North End project area looks like and how it works today. To begin, Andrea said, it includes about 4 square miles of the city, about 10 percent of the city's land area. It has a population of 10,234 or about 10 percent of the city's population. (The project area runs basically from Dalrymple Road north to the Chattahoochee River, and from the west side of Roswell Road to Georgia 400 in the east.)

One feature of the project area is that the value of housing is lower than the city as a whole. The median home value is \$339,000 vs. \$545,000 in the city as a whole. And when apartment buildings are sold, the sales price per unit is \$111,000 vs. \$152,000 on average in the city. Interestingly, apartment vacancy rates and rents are not that much lower in the project area than elsewhere in the city.

Vacancy rates for retail, however, are much higher than elsewhere in Sandy Springs. In 2017, they were nearly 21 percent, vs. about 7 percent for the city as a whole. But the retail vacancy rate fluctuates more in the North End project area than in other parts of the city, which probably reflects the size of stores there.

Importantly for the Task Force's work, the North End has many more large tracts under single-entity ownership than is common elsewhere in Sandy Springs. The average commercial parcel is 22 acres in the project area vs. 15 in the city as a whole. One tract, where the Circo/Ecco Apartments are located, is 44 acres.

Two other important things to know, Andrea said:

- Access north and south in the project area is good—as long as you are driving. That's because of Roswell Road and Georgia 400. But access is poor if you are walking or riding a bike. There are sidewalks along Roswell Road, but the size and speed of the road discourages pedestrians and cyclists. As for other parts of the North End, there are no easy ways to get from one area to another by foot or bike.
- Crime rates are no worse in the North End than in other parts of the city, although public perception is that crime is higher there. Police statistics show that is not so.

SWOT analysis

The meeting then turned to a SWOT analysis, which stands for “strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.” As Otis explained, this is a common exercise in strategic planning that helps groups see any situation clearly and focuses them on the ways things can be improved.

In this exercise, strengths and weaknesses are seen as things that are internal to the project area and are present at this moment. Opportunities and threats are usually external to the area and more future-oriented.

Otis asked Andrea if she would give the two groups a “starter list” of strengths and weaknesses, based on her analysis of the area. Here were Andrea’s “starter” strengths and weaknesses for the North End project area:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proximity to natural resource areas • Roswell Road/GA 400 offer north-south access to other parts of the region • Housing is more affordable than other parts of the city • 98% of Roswell Road has sidewalks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural areas and parks are not well connected with majority of existing residents • Impact of regional congestion on Roswell Road (both for autos and pedestrians) • There is a lack of walkable, urban type development in the North End • Lack of bike/pedestrian infrastructure, especially on roads other than Roswell

Otis asked the groups, then, to add to this list. Here’s what they came up with:

Group 1:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Larger parcels • School sites • Lower rental rates for retail • Undeveloped land in Morgan Falls (golf course) • Underutilized retail that could be revitalized • Affordable housing stock • Easements (power lines) that could be used as amenities • Existing and future MARTA connections & infrastructure • Low crime rate • Regional access 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly profitable current uses on large parcels • Significant number of residents send kids to private schools • Underutilized retail • Code does not allow development beyond one-for-one residential in certain areas • Very expensive land • Topography (stream buffers and River Corridor limits construction) • River access is privately owned • Perception of north-end • Lack of destinations • Public transit only along Roswell Road

Group 2:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large tracts of land (lesser need for assemblage) • Community support for redevelopment • Cost of land lower than the rest of the city • Morgan Falls parks and sports fields • Public and private education achievement • Historic resources present 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topography (stream buffers, River Corridor) • Land entirely privately-owned • Retail in decline • Access to amenities is limited (perception issue?) • Congestion • Poor perception of public education • Not well-known historic resources • Last-mile connectivity is missing • Limited river crossings • Classroom turnover rate

Otis then asked the groups to consider the project area’s opportunities and threats. Here is what they came up with:

Group 1:

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variety of funding sources (bonds, private funding, social impact investment, etc.) • MARTA expansion • Mindset change (preferences in life style) • Current residents looking to downsize • Preservation of workforce housing • Steps to homeownership • Ready for economic downturn • Opportunities to expand public and private partnerships • More private funding (social impact investments) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with GDOT • Fulton County property tax • Unknown political environment (i.e. No citizens appetite for bond could limit funding) • Unspoken community feeling • Gentrification/displacement • Inability to obtain and control land • Potential continued increase of construction cost • Lack of available federal funds that there used to be (i.e. housing) • MARTA potentially not building other station

Group 2:

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transit station (rail) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ TOD sites identified • Good access to 400 • Retail and offices sites available to locate a post-secondary education hub (catalyst) • Outside pressure makes the area desirable because it is still relatively affordable • PPP available to maintain affordable living – subsidies (national resources available) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncertainty of transit funding • Federal funding uncertain • Building codes/ state policy • Increasing construction costs • Market forces raise costs • Displacement of current residents

Next steps

Otis ended the meeting by reviewing what the agenda would be for the next meeting. At that meeting, he said, he would ask the groups to write a vision statement for the North End, similar to what the citizens did in Meeting 2, the public visioning session. When combined and edited, the vision statement would be approximately a page and a half of text and would describe how the North End project area would look like and how it would work when revitalization was complete.

In drafting the vision statement, Otis said, he thought the groups should lean heavily on what the citizens said in the visioning session, what the SWOT analysis revealed about the area’s potential, and their own knowledge and judgment.

If the two groups can produce the elements of a vision statement efficiently, then he thought they could move on to outlining the three to seven “strategic initiatives” that would form the plan for the North End. These initiatives would be the high-level efforts that would have to be accomplished in order for the vision to be achieved.

Task Force members said they were ready to tackle the vision and strategic initiatives work, and were confident they could complete that work on Aug. 22.

Appendix

Here is Andrea Worthy's PowerPoint presentation about the North End project area's current situation:



Demographics

- North End is younger, more diverse and less affluent than Sandy Springs overall

	North End	Sandy Springs
Population (2016)	10,234	102,216
White	39%	66%
Black	41%	21%
Other	20%	13%
Median Age	34.3	35.7
Median Household Income	\$51,331	\$63,401
Average Household Size	1.92	2.21

Source: American Community Survey, 2016

Residential

- Residents in the North End are less likely to be homeowners than in the rest of the city
- Housing costs (both owner and renter) are lower
- Multi-family units in north end are more likely to be older, garden style (i.e., lower density)

	North End	Sandy Springs
Renters	69%	53%
Homeowners	31%	47%
<u>Multifamily Rental</u>		
# Units	6,300	22,000
Vacancy (5 year average)	6.6%	7.5%
Avg. Asking Rent/SF	\$1.13	\$1.26
Sales Price/Unit (2017)	\$111,000	\$152,000
<u>For Sale</u>		
Median Home Value (2016)	\$339,000	\$545,000

Source: American Community Survey 2016, CoStar

Retail

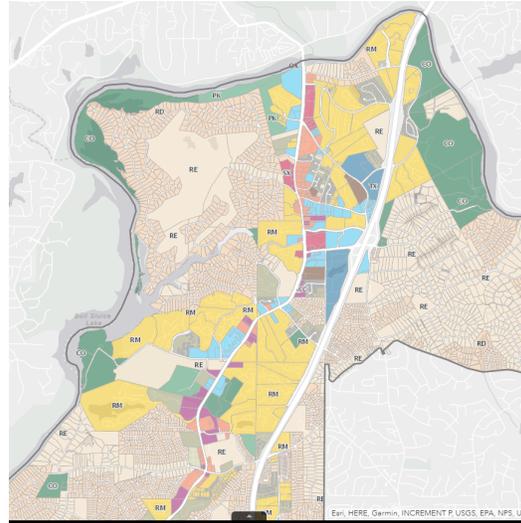
- 11 properties, 458,000 SF (7% of city total)
- Vacancy rate is higher than elsewhere in Sandy Springs
- Rental rate growth in North End has been slower than City

	Vacancy		Average Rental Rate	
	North End	City	North End	City
2013	22.5%	7.1%	\$14.49	\$16.48
2014	8.9%	7.2%	\$17.20	\$18.84
2015	9.2%	6.5%	\$15.68	\$18.15
2016	6.3%	6.8%	\$19.03	\$24.08
2017	20.9%	6.9%	\$19.28	\$23.33

Source: CoStar

Property Ownership

- There are more large tracts of land under single ownership because of the apartment complexes and shopping centers
 - Average commercial parcel (acres): North End = 22 / City = 15
 - Examples in north:
 - North River Shopping Center: 12 acres
 - Circo/Ecco Apartments: 44 acres



Crime

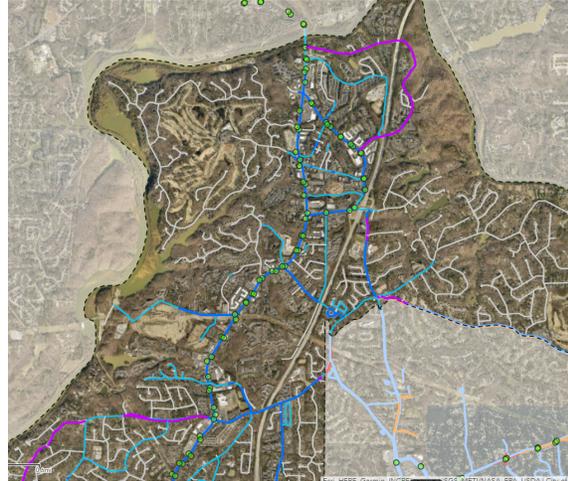
- Crime rates in north end are similar to rates City-wide

Part I Crimes				
Year	N3 & N4 Beats		Total Sandy Springs	
	#	Rate Per 1,000 Population	#	Rate Per 1,000 Population
2015	602	20.9	2,207	21.0
2016	621	21.5	2,459	23.4
2017	494	17.1	2,932	27.9
YTD July 2018	243	8.4	1,023	9.7

Source: Sandy Springs Police Department

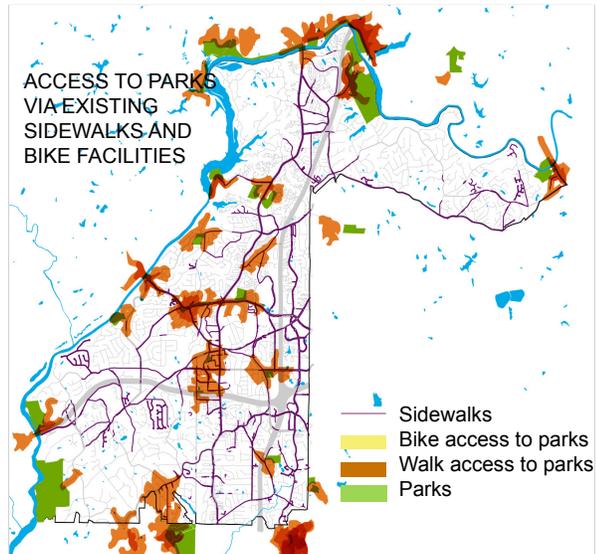
Access and mobility

- Major North-South roads: GA-400, Roswell Road
- North End is dominated by Roswell Road, but has developed differently than the rest of the City:
- In North End, Roswell Road has fewer signalized intersections (average of 2 signals/mile), larger parcels with direct frontage, more topography and curves that limit sight distance
- MARTA bus route along Roswell Road (similar to other parts of Sandy Springs)



Parks

- More large public parks in North End: Chattahoochee River, Overlook Park, Abernathy Greenway, Morgan Falls, National Parks
- Access is constrained by street network and lack of pedestrian and bicycle facilities



Abundance of natural resource assets

- Significant and large natural assets in the North End but they are not well connected with the residents
- Development regulations impact types of development that can occur (i.e., Chattahoochee River Corridor)

